



Q&A with Chris Ware

Chris Ware, an exhibition about the artist's upcoming novel set in Omaha, opens February 16. The following is an e-mail conversation between Sheldon curator Dan Siedell and the artist.

What is a graphic novel?

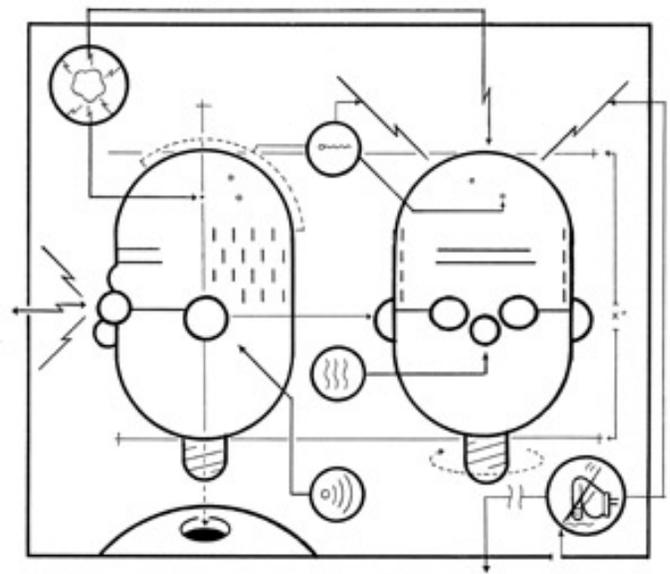
Well, if it was about 30 years ago, I'd say that it was an exceedingly explicit and lengthy book that our parents would have been embarrassed to have been caught with like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Tropic of Capricorn*, but lately the word has been applied to comic books of a long and more serious form, like *Maus* or *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken*.

Can you explain the context of your graphic novel based in Omaha?

I've been working on a long comic strip story for the past six years set in Omaha, which is where I was born and was raised to the age 16. Like anyone who had a relatively happy childhood, the story is loosely autobiographical, and is set partly in one day in 1975 (though one chapter also takes place largely in the 1950s, and a later chapter covers the years 1958 through the present) and in it the characters and people and family members sort of freely intermix in a way that I guess is similar to what happens in one's dreams (i.e., "I dreamed last night that I was married to my second grade teacher, except that she wasn't my teacher, she was my grandfather and we were on a boat playing checkers," etc.). Along these lines, I've tried to use settings that are so familiar to me I could close my eyes and draw detailed maps of them, such as a school I attended and a house up the street from where I grew up, as well as a few downtown build-



(Above) Chris Ware in Chicago;
(Below) Chris Ware self-portrait



ings ... though this decision was only because I knew the spaces so intimately; there's no encoded editorial commentary about Omaha or Nebraska intended; i.e., if I'd grown up in Seattle, I'm sure I would've set the story there.

What will the show at the Sheldon consist of?

Dry original drawings and pages from this story-in-progress, as well as other earlier original comic strips with an autobiographical or Omaha-centric tang to them; also any notes or sketches that might be easily rationalized under such a rubric. My original drawings are quite technically icy and expressively dead, however, so this show could probably be considered more of an exhibition of specimens, like insects pinned onto paraffin, rather than an exhibition of real art. In my comics at least, the “real art” (or what little there is) rests in the printed, finished books (or, more properly, in the mind of the reader.) I guess it’s a little like hanging strips of movie film on the wall and calling the show an exhibition of cinema, or something.

How did you get started doing comics?

Basically, it was the only thing I could do as a kid other than feel sorry for myself, so I threw myself into it. As well, I read a lot of terrible superhero comics and operated under the misapprehension that I would somehow contract superpowers or at the very least grow up to have a strong, muscular body, neither of which transpired. Also, a quite talented retired cartoonist named Hank Barrow (who had worked for the *Omaha World-Herald*) lived down the street from me and I used to visit him during the day and watch him draw; I found the whole process of drawing very mystical and mysterious as a kid, and I desperately wanted to learn any tricks I could. (Of course, there aren’t any tricks other than practice and trying to see as clearly as possible.)

You have received national attention, not only by the comic art world, but in the museum world. Why?

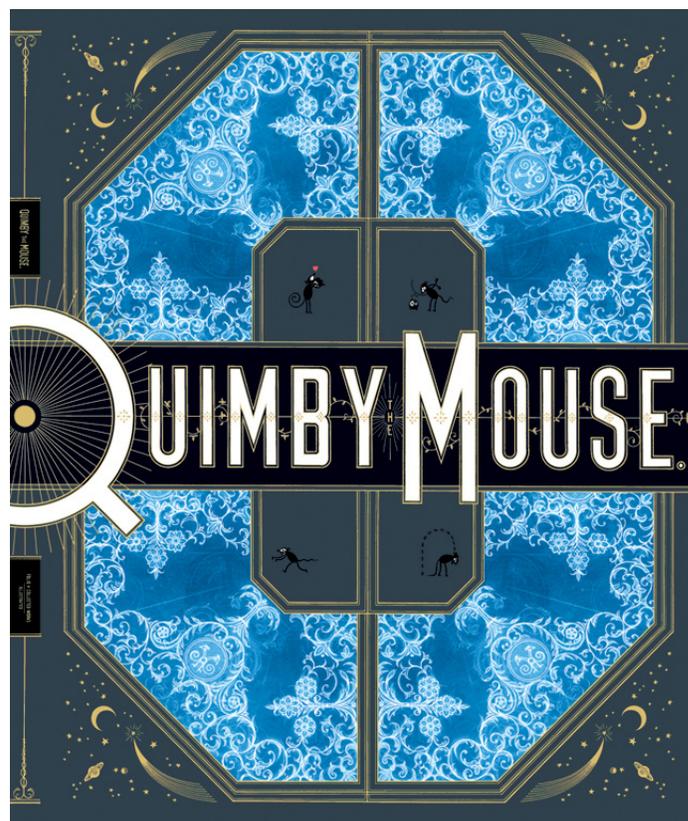
I’m not sure, but I think it might be partly due to the fact that until recently comics were such a labor-intensive, remote, solely commercial and financially unrewarding discipline that only someone deeply deluded would actually devote one’s life to trying to do something more personal with them. If I learned anything from my pragmatic Nebraskan upbringing, however, it was a sort of stony tenacity, so I suppose in a very, very small world of cartoonists I guess I might appear unusual, simply due to my age and quantity of output. I’ve also tried to put as much emotion into my stories and to be as truthful as I can possibly be, though I’ve still got a long way to go as far as that’s concerned.

What do you look forward to about the Sheldon project?

I’d like it to be an amusing and dense sort of experience for the museum-goer and for the artwork to be as clearly understandable and coherent as possible. There seems to be a sort of tacit wink among a lot of modern artists that they should disorient and lecture their audience or, even worse, have a message, both of which tenets I’m fundamentally repelled by and opposed to. At the same time, I’d hope that I’m able to at least hint at the same range of baffling emotion and experience one encounters in life without being syrupy, patronizing or compromised, though I realize that all sounds ridiculously pretentious.

What do you fear most about the project?

Making you mad with the selections of the pages, and concomitantly, your getting fired for suggesting it all to the museum in the first place.



Quimby the Mouse (2003, Fantagraphics Books)